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# Book Review: Talk to the Trees and Guess What?

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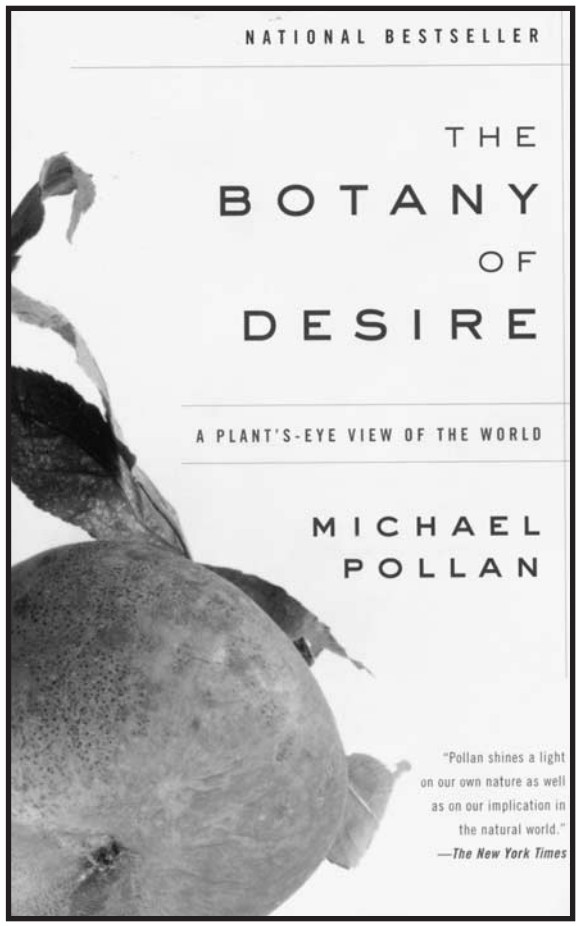
# Talk to the Trees and Guess What?

## The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World

*Michael Pollan*

by Charles F. Angell




A popular book of the 1970s *The Secret Life of Plants* argued that "evidence now supports the vision of the poet and the philosopher that plants are living, breathing, communicating creatures, endowed with personality and the attributes of a soul. It is only we, in our blindness, who have insisted on considering them automata." Such notions led to wondering whether houseplants adapted in different ways to the musical tastes of the homeowner/horticulturalist. The theory held that plants responded far more favorably to Beethoven and Mozart than to the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Meat Loaf, to rondos rather than riffs, andantes rather than acid. Michael Pollan has given these theories a new spin. Working in his vegetable garden one May afternoon, he envisions a "coevolutionary bargain" between himself and the plants: ". . .the garden suddenly appeared before me in a whole new light , the manifold delights it offered to the eye and nose and tongue no longer quite so innocent and passive. All these plants, which I'd always regarded as the objects of my desire, were also, I realized, subjects, acting on me, getting me to do things for them they couldn't do for themselves."

Pollan explores this symbiotic and reciprocal relationship in four chapters devoted respectively to the apple, the tulip, marijuana, and the potato—fruit, beaut, toot, and root. "I'm interested," he writes, "not only in how the potato altered the course of European history or how cannabis helped fire the romantic revolution in the West, but also in the way notions in the minds of men and women transformed the appearance, taste, and mental effects of these plants." Pollan engages the traditional American notions that humans are at war with nature, what he terms the "heroic story," or that we merge spiritually with nature, the romantic story, or even that we have transgressed nature, the environmental story, to tell a "different kind of story," one that relies on a web metaphor of reciprocity between humans and nature. This I might call a very contemporary take, a sort of networking story that hardwires humans and nature into a complex circuitry where human desire provides the energy and natural selection dictates the outcome.

Using the apple to illustrate his meaning, Pollan follows the meanderings John Chapman, a.k.a Johnny Appleseed who planted orchards along the Ohio and Mohican Rivers. The apple's evolutionary advantage lay in its sweetness which attracted animals that devoured the sweet flesh and transported the seeds further and further afield. "The blandishments of sugar," Pollan suggests, "are what got the apple out of the Kazakh forests, across Europe, to the shores of North America, and eventually into John Chapman's canoe." Yet sweetness, in a sugar poor country, wasn't the apple's only appeal; fermented apple sugar becomes the alcohol of hard cider, the drink of choice in rural Protestant America. Pollan dismisses what he calls the Disney saccharine version of Johnny Appleseed, an Americanized Christian saint, and considers him "the American Dionysus." Like Dionysus, Chapman moved between the domesticated and the wild bringing the wilderness into domestication and the domesticated back to the wilderness. "John Chapman's millions of seeds and thousands of miles changed the apple, and the apple changed America."

If Chapman's hybridizing of the apple species allowed the apple to adapt to the new world, hybridizing the tulip created its own brand of Dionysian frenzy in the old world. Pollan's chapter on the tulip explores how between 1634 and 1637 "tulipomania" sparked "a speculative frenzy that sucked people at every level of society into its whorl." Horticulturalists hoarded the bulbs and sold them at extravagant prices. The tulip responded to its human admirers by allowing itself to be cloned in ever more beautiful forms; its survival depended

upon the human regard for its beauty. What we see in not just the tulip but flowers generally is "the very heart of nature's double nature-that is the contending energies of creation and dissolution, the spring toward complex form and the tidal pull away from it." For Pollan this "complex form" of floral beauty incorporates both the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the desire for order and the poignancy of its impermanence.

In his chapter "Desire: Intoxication Plant: Marijuana," Pollan considers forbidden plants and their "power to change the subjective experience of reality we call consciousness." Plant evolution depended in large part on chemical toxins to defend against animal and insect predators; some of these toxins, nicotine and caffeine for example, produced agreeable psychoactive effects on certain predators, humans among them. Cannabis clearly fits this category so well that in the US it's become an outlaw plant despite efforts to decriminalize its use for medicinal purposes. Pollan regards the legal campaign against marijuana as the result of its "close identification with the counterculture" of the 1960s. As so often the case with political interventions, the drug war against growing marijuana, principally in Mexico, led to unintended consequences, namely a large market for "domestically grown marijuana" and a "triumph of protectionism." American growers, in their efforts to find a strain of cannabis that would grow in more northern climates, discovered that by crossing the equatorial species *Cannabis sativa* with the frost tolerant species *Cannabis indica* (indigenous to Afghanistan) they could combine the "smooth taste" of sativa with the "superior potency and hardiness" of indica. When the Reagan administration in the 1980s went after the growers in California's Humboldt County, the producers moved offshore to a more hospitable Amsterdam and indoor plant experimental laboratories where the "Dutch genius for horticulture going back to the tulip craze" hybridized cannabis strains with until then unimagined potencies. Pollan theorizes that psychoactive drugs appeal to our desire for pleasure of the moment, for "fulfillment here and now," an appeal that undercuts the foundation of both Christianity and capitalism which depend upon future fulfillment. Apollonian discipline and order again contests with Dionysian desire and misrule even amid the bosky dell.

What happens when the corporate behemoth enters this dell? In "Desire: Control Plant: The Potato" Pollan writes of his experiment growing New Leaf potatoes, a strain genetically engineered by Monsanto Corporation to produce from the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a toxin lethal to the potato beetle. (Pollan later notes that, because it contains a toxin, the Food and Drug Administration refuses to consider the New Leaf a food and therefore it falls under the jurisdiction of the Environmental Protection Agency as a pesticide. I can only echo his astonished "What?") The chapter recounts much of the potato's history from the time of its introduction to Europe in the 16th century, through the Irish potato famine, and into the present. Pollan devotes much of his chapter to the effects of corporate monoculture, observing that Monsanto has a patent on the New Leaf and can identify its strains almost as though the plant had a universal product code stamped on its leaves; rather than belonging to a common heritage, the New Leaf seeds have become Monsanto's "intellectual property." The New Leaf meets the demand for a reliable plant and a potato commodity that supplies McDonalds, Burger King, and the rest of the fast food French fry franchises. The safety of this genetically altered food supply concerns Pollan, as it should anyone, and in talking to responsible scientists, he learned that while no scientific proof existed that the New Leafs were unsafe, neither did any research exist that showed them equivalent to unaltered potatoes. (Monsanto on its New Leaf label doesn't indicate the seeds have been genetically altered; the company for certain doesn't say they're classified as a pesticide.) The implications of monoculture also worry Pollan who, like Eric Schlosser in *Fast Food Nation*, sees farmers contracted to corporate controlled agriculture for their seeds and, in the words of one farmer, gives "corporate America one more noose around my neck." Biological diversity has been sacrificed for product reliability.

*The Botany of Desire* celebrates diversity and the Apollonian gardener's ongoing confrontation with Dionysian plants with their cross-pollinations and geographic wanderings. At summer's end, Pollan says, my garden "was an anarchy of rampant growth and ripe fruit, all of it threatening to burst the geometry of my beds and trellises and paths." All gardeners share this feeling of working like "figures on the margins, moving between the realms of the wild and the cultivated, the anciently given and the newly made, the Dionysian and the Apollonian." And so, as I walked behind my rototiller in early May, I felt after reading Pollan's book, a new enthusiasm for the task, that even though I was preparing the soil as I had done for many prior years, I was intellectually pollinated for an adventure whose outcome despite my Apollonian mindset and given the presence of a Dionysian woodchuck was always uncertain. *The Botany of Desire* made me see things anew, and after this long, cold winter, desire the spring.

*—Charles F. Angell is Professor of English*